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ABSTRACT

Public and private organizations have developed toy libraries in Sweden for children with disabilities and children in need of special support for their development. Toy libraries have become places where parents can acquire advice with regard to play, meet a pedagogue with experience with children with handicaps, and meet other parents with the same problems. Described are the philosophy of the toy libraries, the role of the toy librarian in making the child's abilities visible to the parents, and the results of surveys which indicate that use of toy libraries in the habilitation of children and youth is increasing. (JDD)

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TOY LIBRARIES IN SWEDEN IN 1988

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It's today 25 years since Karin Stensland-Junker, university lecturer, and Evy Blid, teacher in methodics, started the first toy library in Sweden. Due to their own experiences of children with different handicaps and the knowledge of the importance of play in child development they established this activity.

At some places in the world there were already toy libraries where parents could borrow toys for their children. In our country the activity has only been offered to children with disabilities and children in need of special support for their development. Toy libraries became a place where parents could come to get advice with regard to play, to meet a pedagogue with experience of children with handicap but also a place where they could meet other parents with the same problems. The parents may borrow play material which is specially selected to meet the possibilites and difficulties of their own child. By using the abilities of each child in natural situations in their daily lifes in their homes where the child feel comfortable and safe the parents will in a simple way become active in the habilitation of their child. Play is the natural way in which a child get experiences, knowledge and is learning.

Playing is also a source for joy and community for the whole family. Toy libraries have always noticed the role of the siblings. Sometimes it's difficult to have a handicapped sister or brother who requires much time and interest from their parents. For this reason there is always a nice toy for the siblings as well.

This is a brief description of the basic ideas of toy libraries. We have about 15 years experience from the field and we have seen the work be developed, called in question and changed but the basic idea is still there as the main idea is based on a real need of parents. The need to meet someone who can give them a piece of advice with regard to play exactly adapted for their child. To meet someone with experience of children with similar handicaps and to get a piece of advice and hints about how to help the child to play and how to make use of the possibilties to obtain such a positive development as possible.

The parents and the toy librarian meet with the child and they have a communitive aim to give the child possibilities to play and to learn but also to give the child activities and later on a positive and meaningful

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spare time. The activity in Toy libraries is as import and actual today as 25 years ago. At that time society didn't give much of support to families who had a child with handicap - there were no daily child care and only a few schools. The schools to be found were big boarding schools situated close to the cities a long way from home. The choice for the parents were to leave their child at such a school or to give the child care, education and activities by themselves.

Today we know that a home environment and a family is the best base for a child to be raised in. The goal of society is to give the families the support they need in order to make it possible for every child to live and grow up in their own home. This includes all children - which also means children with handicaps. The main responsibility for the child must belong to the parents but it's necessary to obtain the support they need from society. I have learnt that it's not the kind or the extent of handicap that is decisive for the situation of the familily, that is how they feel.

The goal of the toy libraries 25 years ago was and still is to give families help to help themselves - to give them support with regard to play but to give them the true feeling that they are the most important persons effecting the job. That the job is filled with pleasure and joy is no disadvantage. Play and joy belong to each other. It's neccessary that play/learning is positive and enjoyable for the child and the parents. It's the curiousity and own activity we shall wake so that they start play, train and learn.

As you know those who play never grow old. Bernard Shaw has said:

"We do not cease to play
because we grow old
but we grow old
because we cease to play"

Advice in play and lending of play material

The work done at the toy libraries is based on children's play. Children are developed in many different ways, emotional, physical, psychological, social and intellectual. When playing all these components work toghether in a natural way.

For children with any kind of handicap the normal development process is often disturbed. These children need help to be able to develop optimally.. This help ought to be concentrated on noticing the abilities of the child though play and to build on the strong sides of the child. Toy libraries is

based on volontarity and is part of the service that society offers parents. At cooperation between parents, toy libraries and other persons round the child is necessary.

At the toy library the parents get pedagogical advice and suggestions to train the child by playing. The abililties and the developmental level of the child is the base.The parents can free of charge borrow special play material to continue to activate their child at home.

By learning to know the child and it's possibilities and limitations the toy librarian together with the parents can shape play situations and chose play material that stimulate the child development. Sometimes a consultation with physio therapist, speech therapist or other experts is made in order to make play a part of other treatment.

The philosophy of lending of play material can briefly be described in this way.
The parents may at the visit at the toy library borrow:
- play material to train lacking functions
- play material that's interesting for the child
- play material that the child can use by himself in order to believe in his own competence
- play material for siblings
- play material gathering the whole family

The lending and shaping of play advice follow a special elaborated plan. This make it possible for the parents to note the steps of success in their child's development. When chosing material to bring home the spontanous wish of the child is in focus. With the cooperation of the parents the material is used during a certain time in the home. There is however an openess for the wishes and interests of the child as well as of the parents. It's important that parents and siblings also enjoy the material. The toy librarian has to watch that all senses are developed and not only the disabilitiues and to try to give the child such a comprehensive stimulation as possible. How often the parents visit the toy library will be decided from time to time but at least they visit the toy library once a month.

The task of the toy librarian is to make the child's abilities visable for the parents. She must have a sensitive ear for the child's own initiative , to meet the child at his level, to catch up the ideas, feelings and maturity of eaxh child in order to go on working on this. For children with disabilities the steps can be short but the way long.This means that there must be a certain value in order to motivate a continous training. The play material must be seen as an instrument which by the way they

are used gives better provisions for development.

An investigation made by Björck-Åkesson, Brodin, Hellberg and Lindberg from the WRP International (Women Researchers in Play and Disability) has shown that there are today 70 toy libraries in Sweden and a few new ones will start shortly. Most of these are run by the county councils, six by communities, four by The Association for Mental Retardation and two by the Red Cross organization. Between 3 and 3,5 thousand children today are concerned about the toy libraries in our country. Most toy libraries apply to families with a child with all kind of handicaps - one of them is only for children with hearing impairments and disturbances in speech and communication.

Most toy libraries need a prescription approved by a doctor in order to be able to go to the toy library. Many toy libraries cannot accept all children who need support due to a lack of time. They must then wait for their turn. These figures are collected from a brand new investigation in Sweden . The project has been effected by members of WRP International which is an organization working with different research projects concerning play and children with disabilities. The job has been financed by the Department of Social Welfare/The Swedish State Intheritance Fund.

M Lindberg has earlier effected two surveys on toy libraries in Sweden in 1981 with a follow up study in 1984. We have compared the results between these surveys and found that the activity today at a higher extent is included in the coordinated habilitation for children and youth, in which the toy libraries are the pedagogical resource. The team work in the habilitation of children up to 20 years give new aspects on the job and further possibilities to receive an overview on the child and the parents but at the same time the claims on the teacher increase.

A comparison between the three surveys shows that the staff at the toy libraries often go on educating themselves. Most of the toy libraries are pree-school teachers and half of them are also special teachers. The results of the survey also shows that several toy libraries have started different group activities for parents and children. Today the communities in our country are responsible for the daily child care for all pre-school children - which means also for children with different handicaps. Earlier we had special groups for children with handicaps, for example a special group for children with motor disability and another group for children with mental retardation. Today the situation has changed as there often is only one child with for example motor disabiltiy in a special day care center in connection to the home environment. This cuts both ways. One disadvantage is that the child has nobody who he can identify himself with and another is that the parents have nobody to discuss their problems

with. The need and wishes to belong to another group have increased during the last years and the toy libraries have an answer to this. The group activities have many different forms. It can consist of group who go swimming together, rythmics or a play group and is set up according to the wishes from the parents. This gives the parents possibilities to meet other parents who have the same difficulties. Despite that the toy libraries are center for children and parents with dificulties they are experiences as very positive and a place where both children and adults like to visit. To work at a toy library is the most wonderful job I can think of. An enormously sensitive ear is required and creativity and knowledge of child development is a provision. To have a positive way of looking at life and to believe in development and an ability to understand the value of other abilities than intelligence is a gift.

This is the goals of all the toy libraries and in order to meet and exchange experiences and knowledge we have established an association called The Swedish Toy Library Association. Almost 100% of the toy librarians are members as well as other persons who want to support the work. It's an non-profit association with the goal to take care of the interests of the members and to work with actual questions. The association is the contact body for the different toy libraries and is working for a high quality in the toy library activities. The association has also a newsletter Idébanken, which gives acual information and is a mouthpiece for the members.

An important task is to arrange or initiate further training for the toy librarians. In October 1988 the next conference will take place. The theme will be : "The dimensions of play". In connection with this conference we will also celebrate that toy libraries in Sweden in 1988 are 25 years and that the association will celebrate it's 10th anniversary.